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Scroll down about half way for comments on Duerksen family revelations

Revelations From the Past: A Guide to the Use of the 1835 Census

By Alan Peters

In the last issue of the *Bulletin*, I described the information contained in the recently-discovered 1835 census of the Molotschna Mennonite Colony in South Russia. Since more information regarding the actual census entries is now be coming available, in this issue I will begin discussing how the family researcher can use the census itself in genealogical research.

The first step for the researcher is to make sure, to the fullest extent possible, that the ancestor in question actually lived in the Molotschna in 1835. While this seems to be a clear-cut matter, it may be more complicated than you think!

For example, the census does not record the existence of the village of Gnadenfeld. That village was established in 1835 by a large and important migration of Mennonites, largely from the Neumark area of Prussia. Unfortunately, it appears that they arrived only weeks after the census was taken! This excludes an important group of people--from whom many present-day Mennonites in the United States are descended--from the potential bonanza of information that the census would have provided, had it been taken a few weeks later.

For example, the family of Peter Becker, the father of early Mennonite Brethren leaders Jacob P. Becker and Benjamin Bekker, is unfortunately not recorded in the census. This leaves the parentage of Peter Becker still in doubt. If the census had been taken a few weeks later, it would have indicated the name of Peter Becker's father, which probably would have linked him to the records of the Przechowka Mennonite Church, which record the earliest generations of the Becker family.

In addition to the Gnadenfeld group, there were a surprising number of later immigrants to the Molotschna. Many families today do not realize that their ancestors migrated to the Molotschna later than 1835, and therefore will not be recorded in the 1835 census.

To make the matter even more confusing, I am discovering that the village traditionally given as the birthplace of Molotschna residents often is not their actual birthplace, but seems rather to be the village that they lived in during their later childhood or, more likely, where they lived at the time of their marriage. With the help of the 1835 census, we are discovering that many reported birthplaces, sometimes even those that appear in the person's obituary, are not accurate. Some such persons reported to have been born in the Molotschna were not even born in Russia, but rather in their former homeland of Prussia!

Consequently, when a researcher limits his or her research in the census to the village supposed to be the place of residence, the actual place of residence in 1835 can easily be overlooked. If you are convinced that your ancestor lived in the Molotschna in 1835, and you cannot locate him or her in the village where they supposedly lived, you must begin to search, village by village, for the real place they lived in 1835!

Since the census clearly records most changes in a family's residence from about 1816 to approximately 1846, you can often find a reference to the exact year that your ancestor moved to or from the village that you always thought was their birthplace. Incidentally, the number of recorded moves is surprisingly large, underscoring the fact that our ancestors were very mobile, even in the close confines of the Molotschna Colony.

Another surprising revelation from the census is the num ber of multi-family living situations in 1835. It is not unusual to find three or four families living in the same home. We can only suppose that it was not financially feasible, even in 1835 when land was still plentiful, for young couples to strike out on their own. Instead, they resided with other family members--parents, in-laws, step-parents, or siblings--sometimes for many years, before settling on their own, often in a newly-established village to the east.

The research implications are clear: if you do not find ancestors where you expect to find them, keep on looking. If they lived in Molotschna in 1835, you are bound to find them somewhere! There are only a couple of pages that appear to be missing from the census, so the chances of your ancestor having lived there be not having been recorded apparently are exceedingly small.

The 1835 census is changing many long-held beliefs about our family histories. An example of this is the Duerksen family. For many years, many Duerksens in the United States and Canada have traced their ancestry to a certain Johann Duerksen, born about 1750. A number of Duerksen family histories record the various branches of the descendants of this progenitor.

I began to worry about this connection when I came across the birth entries for a number of the Duerksen children in the Tragheimerweide Mennonite Church records in Prussia. These church records gave identical names and birth dates to those found in the Duerksen family books, but list the father as a David Duerksen.

Unfortunately, the death record of that David Duerksen gave an age that indicated he was born in 1761 rather than 1750. This meant that the oldest son listed in most Duerksen books, a Johann Duerksen (born about 1766, according to the 1835 census), could hardly be his child! This latter Johann was the father of Johann J. Duerksen, often called "Oel- Ohm," the ancestor of many American Duerksens.

A careful review of the 1835 census has settled the matter once and for all. The entry for household #3 in Alexanderthal shows a Cornelius David Duerksen, whose family information exactly reflects that found in the existing Duerksen genealogies. As a result, the census confirms he was the son of David rather than Johann. Likewise, the census entry for household #11 in Alexanderthal indicates that Johann Cornelius Duerksen, born about 1766, lived there with his family, including son Johann ("Oel-Ohm"), who was born in 1801. That entry clearly states that his farther was a Cornelius Duerksen, rather than the Johann Duerksen also incorrectly given as the father of Cornelius Duerksen of Alexanderthal #3.

As a result, the 1835 census has corrected a long-repeated inaccuracy about the Duerksen ancestry. We can now begin to explore how these two Alexanderthal Duerksens were related to each other. They lived close to each other, giving us some reason to suspect that they possibly were cousins. As the census clears up one problem, it creates new opportunities for research! In future issues of the *Bulletin*, I will report on additional discoveries that the census brings to light.

One final note: the Society is in the process of adding the 1835 census entries to the GRANDMA computer system at the Center for MB Studies. Approximately two-thirds of the census has already been entered, making the search process much easier for those families. As you have the opportunity to come to the Center to conduct your family research, be sure you check with GRANDMA to determine if we already have the answers to your genealogical questions.

Just as important, keep the GRANDMA project of the Society in mind as you contemplate the directions of your charitable giving. It provides a wonderful tax-deductible opportunity for broadening our knowledge of Mennonite ancestry as it benefits the research efforts of you and many others who are exploring their Mennonite roots.

Return to June 1995 Table of Contents

Return to CMHS Home Page

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